The Life of a Teenage Before and After World War II

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It is often said that Illinois is the microcosm of the United States, with its vast prairies and heavy industries, with its villages and its big cities. Whether from Chicago or downstate Cairo, nowhere is the transition of American values and culture more prominent than in the life of a teenager before and after World War II. Teenagers have defined the landscape of Illinois in thought and action throughout history and its results can be seen clearly today.

The earlier part of the twentieth century brought an end to ruralism in Illinois with the introduction of Ford Model T. Cultural and educational facilities became easily and rapidly accessible, and the line between town and country began to disappear. For instance, students in villages would have had to find room and board in town if they wanted to attend high school. Cars introduced demands for good roads, and farmers transported vegetables and livestock cheaply to the markets. Rural teens began to discover the convenience of the car not only to attend school but also found it much more convenient to slip into town for a movie or to go shopping. Also, inter-city high school football and basketball contests became major social events, and as the nation began coming out of the Depression , teenagers utilizing the auto, soon enough created popular "hang outs."

Teenage life was further altered by the introduction of new appliances that cut down time spent on chores. Telephones that became widespread by 1927 allowed instantaneous communication not only between friends, but also between teenage males and females. Stoves, refrigerators, sewing machines, irons, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners made housework easier and removed the need for domestic servants. Thus, these inventions made the teens of Illinois subject to chores.

Better farm equipment removed the toll on labor and lessened the desire for youth to plan a life in agriculture. Leisure time led to growth of magazines and advertisements geared toward teens, whether for clothes, gadgets, or cigarettes. Though fashions were subdued in color and tailored due to the Depression and pre-wartime feelings, teenage girls still found refuge in these magazines and advertisements that displayed shorter hemlines, slimmer skirts and little or no trims thus promoting the recycling of textiles in an effort to conserve fabric.

Chicago, being the cultural and economic hub of the state, promoted materialism. The city beckoned youths to buy compulsively—showing billboards saying why wait for the better things in life. Illinois was instantaneously fixated on installment plans, credit purchases and radios, motion pictures, sports, and amusement parks further fueled the euphoria.

World War II called for a different contribution from Illinoisans. The government had a need for skilled and unskilled laborers. Illinois high schools had a tradition to

produce men and women with apt knowledge of typing, shorthand, drafting, machine work, and accounting skills, permitting industry to use more efficient, more complex techniques and routines. Technology was not the only thing that benefited the contribution from the state of Illinois. Hands-on work played a great role as well. Teenagers also aided in collecting scrap metals, which were eventually melted down to make bombs and shells. They went out and searched for all types of metal items. Most of these items would be found on the iron railings or gates surrounding local parks and public buildings.

However, Illinois' greatest contribution was the manpower to fight the war. By the end of the war, more than one million of the combined total sixteen million United States' servicemen came from Illinois. Many were volunteers that filled the ranks and often times at the expense of their high school diploma. Three-fourths of Illinois men served abroad and, like typical teenagers, were concerned about their future after the war. Once back, the servicemen were ready to settle down and apply their newly earned skills in domestic life and were eager to return to Main Street or wait for an “El” train again.

The years after the war were ones of prosperity and confusion. Keenly ready to make up for lost years in war, many teenage Illinoisans, now adults, embraced a new life and entered colleges and universities in record numbers. Enrollment increased from 107,000 in 1940 to 164,000 in 1956, and then soared to 500,000 by late 1970s.

The state upgraded its colleges to full-size universities and opened dozens of community colleges to meet the demand. Two such schools were Southern Illinois University and the Illinois Institute of Technology in Carbondale. The college lifestyle called for change as interaction between the sexes, between blue and white-collared workers, and between whites and minorities increased.

Whether entering college or the workplace, many former servicemen married their high school sweethearts. These marriages saw the births of many babies. Thus, a new group of teenagers were on their way. This latter group of youths had encountered neither the hardships of the Depression nor the rousing nationalism of the war years. When they came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, they were ready to introduce new values to Illinois and America.

Old norms of sexual behavior suddenly gave way. Respect for authority declined sharply in private and public spheres. Confidence in the future gave way to anxiety. Nowhere was this better demonstrated than in colleges and to a lesser extent in high school. Nationwide calls for racial integration were met with resistance by many adult whites, but embraced by the youth. A new revolution was underway. The goals that justified obedience such as the need to study to acquire modem skills, the superior knowledge of teachers, a basic belief in the importance of science and scholarship were no longer of paramount importance.

Teenagers amidst the confusion gave into consumption of alcohol and drugs, free sexual experimentation, long hair, and rock music. The quest for autonomy and identity reached new heights as disgust grew for racism, militarism, and the draft, and cynicism about politics grew because of the Vietnam war and the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, Jr. all combined to produce a revulsion against what has been labeled bureaucratic technological social order.

The remnants of this former way changed as teenagers coped with their identity in a post-modern world. Young Illinoisans' interest rose in community and urban welfare. Illinois teenagers expressed hope for the environmental political change. The backlash of the Seventies gave way to passivity by the Nineties. [From John F. Kennedy, *The Presidency;* Robert P. Howard, *Illinois: A History of the Prairie State;* Richard J. Jensen, *Illinois;* David Rubel, *The United States in the 20th Century;* Mary Watters, *Illinois in the Second World War.*] .

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